



Administrative Issues Journal

Volume 1

Issue 3 *CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS:*
OCTOBER 13th-14th, 2011

Article 16


10-2011

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Recommended Citation

Wichinsky, Lillian and Turturro, Carolyn (2011) "Service-Learning as a Professional Development Tool," *Administrative Issues Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/aij/vol1/iss3/16>

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Service-Learning as a Professional Development Tool

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The authors examined students' attitudes towards grant writing and program evaluation when service learning was integrated into the assignment. Over a two-year period, 71 graduate students participated in an online survey responding to both qualitative and quantitative items. Students overwhelmingly reported that they learned more through the service-learning experience than they would have doing the assignment as an academic exercise. It is recommended that all disciplines seek out service-learning opportunities to promote professional development.

Keywords: Service-Learning, professional development, student attitudes, curriculum development

Service-learning is a form of experiential learning that combines community service with academic instruction. Service learning affords students the opportunity to connect theory to practice in a way that is different from other forms of experiential learning (Brown & Kinsella, 2005; King 2003). Integrating service-learning into "the social work curriculum builds upon the traditional internship by providing students with additional exposure to real world problems experienced by communities" (Scott, 2008, p. 216). Service-learning tasks are paired with structured opportunities that link the tasks to reflection, self discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of knowledge, values and skills. According to King (2003), service learning embodies specific social work values, such as respect for diversity, self-determination, collaboration, social justice, a person-in-environment focus, and accountability. A successful service learning experience changes both the student and the recipient of the service. A fully integrated service-learning course teaches community-based social work skills by linking classroom-learning objectives and social work competencies to service learning experiences in the community (Scott, 2008).

By integrating service-learning into the framework of community practice, students can acquire skills in grant writing and program evaluation, while simultaneously providing a service to an agency that may not have the staff or time to carry out these tasks. Skills in grant writing and evaluation are desirable for every social work practitioner. Yet, often these skills are acquired through "hypothetical" assignments. The purpose of this paper is to describe the service-learning assignments used in two MSW courses at a metropolitan university and to discuss findings from a student survey that measures their perceptions about service learning.

Foundations of Community Practice Course Description

Foundations of Community Practice (Foundations III) is a core requirement of the first year curriculum. The major assignment is a grant (service learning component). Students are asked to collaborate with the agency in which they are interning and identify a need. If the agency has already established a need, the student must carry out the project based on the agency's preference. As part of this assignment, students must sign an agreement with the agency to complete a grant application or proposal, complete a client profile, and identify three funding sources. It is the responsibility of the agency to submit the final grant proposal and to provide the student with the information necessary to complete the work. If the student is not currently enrolled in a field placement then various projects are available through other organizations located in the district. The grant writing component of the community practice class has been in place for the past fifteen years, however, it has only been in the past two years that students have been required to complete a "real life" grant as part of the service learning component. The students have only eight weeks to complete their assignment. They are required to present the final grant proposal to the class and agency. The projects in which students have been involved are varied. Three grants have received funding, ranging

from \$500 received by a neighborhood association for a web based newsletter, to \$2,000 for symphony members to visit public school children and finally \$20,000 to develop the infrastructure of a new agency for youth aging out of foster care. Even when grants are not funded, the agency or organization has the foundation for future grant proposals and applications.

Evaluation Research Course Description

Evaluation research is a core part of the curriculum in the second year of the Community Practice Track of the MSW curriculum in. The course is offered over two semesters. During the first semester, students from the fields of social work, gerontology, and non-profit management learn approaches to evaluation and as their major assignment develop a proposal to carry out a "real life" evaluation. Students work closely with the field instructor to identify a need or area of interest for the agency or organization in which they will perform the evaluation. The second semester is the implementation phase, where students carry out the evaluation. They are responsible for collecting data, analyzing results, and reporting their findings in a professional report which they deliver to the class and the agency. The evaluation assignment has been integrated into the curriculum for the past 15 years.

Students have carried out process, outcome, and program evaluations as well as needs assessments in numerous agencies and programs throughout the state. These projects have ranged in size and scope. Some examples include; an evaluation of foster parent training offered through the Department of Human Services, an evaluation of adult dental services offered through Medicaid, an evaluation of an Employment Assistance Program offered through a university medical center and a needs assessment of services offered to youth aging out of foster care. Students learn not only how to carry out an evaluation but learn the pitfalls as well.

Research and Methodology

During the academic years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, a total of 71 graduate students taking either the Foundations III course (N=58), or the Evaluation Research course (N=13) participated in an online survey about the inclusion of service learning in their coursework. The anonymous survey was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. At the end of the semester, instructors emailed a link to Survey Monkey, requesting students to fill out the survey. Participation was not mandatory, although over 90% of the students in the courses completed the survey. The survey contained both open and closed-ended (Likert scale) questions about their experience of doing a real grant proposal or program evaluation for an actual agency.

Findings

Table 1 shows students' ratings of the service learning experience, Foundations course and Evaluation Research course responses were aggregated. It can be seen that while most students rated the experience somewhat to very difficult, tedious, and time-consuming, the majority of students from both classes rated the experience as very interesting and genuine, and not at boring.

Responses to qualitative items were overwhelmingly positive. The question "Do you think you learned or gained more from your service learning experience than you would have gotten if the time spent on the project was spent in the classroom or done as an academic exercise?"

The Foundations III course respondents were enthused:

YES! Dealing with a real agency, real problems, real people with real time constraints and other bumps in the road. It wasn't as smooth and easy as I thought it was going to be. And very good learning opportunity! Glad I didn't just spend it in the classroom or make it up.

Or as another student pointed out:

Definitely! The exercise was academic in nature anyway. I did as much secondary research for this project as any other paper I have written. So if the project is a learning exercise and requires academic creativity, why not spend the time doing it for a real agency out of the classroom. Getting out of the classroom and networking was a great

way to do real world work!

The majority of respondents from the evaluation course preferred the service experience. For example, this student who wrote:

I don't feel that I would have understood all that goes into planning and carrying out a program evaluation from just discussing it in class. I really dislike doing something as just an academic exercise and often lose interest and get frustrated. I very much enjoyed having a useful product at the end of this process.

Limitations

This was an exploratory study that utilized a convenience sample with measures developed by the researchers. During the two years of data collection, there was only one instructor responsible for both courses. There were no incentives offered to students for responding to the survey however, results may not generalize to other instructors.

Discussion and Implications

This preliminary study found that students overwhelmingly preferred to apply skills and knowledge gained in the classroom to real world settings. Although students found the tasks difficult and time-consuming, they also found the assignments extremely interesting and rewarding. The authors recommend that all disciplines seek out service-learning opportunities for preparing students for professional work in their field and carry out research investigating the influence of service-learning on skill acquisition and competency.

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Table 1

Overall on a scale of 1 to 5, please rate how the addition of the service learning component affected the course, (n = 71)

	1 None	2 a little	3 somewhat	4 much	5 a lot	Response count
Difficulty	4.2% (3)	12.7% (9)	35.2% (25)	21.1% (15)	26.8% (19)	71
Interesting	4.3% (3)	2.9% (2)	5.7% (4)	45.7% (32)	41.4% (29)	70
Genuine	2.9% (2)	1.4% (1)	12.9% (9)	38.6% (27)	44.3% (31)	70
Time-consuming	0.0% (0)	1.4% (1)	11.3% (8)	29.6% (21)	57.7% (41)	71
Tedious	4.2% (3)	9.9% (7)	35.2% (25)	19.7% (14)	31.0% (22)	71
Boring	67.6% (48)	15.5% (11)	11.3% (8)	2.8% (2)	2.8% (2)	71

Dr. Lillian Wichinsky is currently an Assistant Professor in Social Work at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock. Dr. Wichinsky teaches in the Masters Program and areas of concentration include: Evaluation Research, Research Methods, and Foundations of Community Practice, Diversity and Oppression, Social Welfare Policy, and Global Perspectives in Social Work. Areas of research, evaluation and publication center around service-learning, organizational culture and climate, early childhood education and global perspectives on social work.

Dr. Carolyn Turturro is the coordinator of the Graduate Gerontology Program and offers a Graduate Certificate in Gerontology and a Master of Arts in Gerontology. The interdisciplinary program is housed in the School of Social Work. Dr. Turturro teaches coursework in the gerontology and graduate and undergraduate social work programs. Courses taught include Research Methods, Statistics, Evaluation Research, and Biology & Psychology of Aging.